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ABSTRACT

The effect of the presence of a parent on the frequency and complexity of the social behavior of children at two cooperative preschools was studied. It was expected that securely attached children would explore their environment more comprehensively and competently when a parent was present than would insecurely attached children. Parents participated in the classrooms one day a week. Data on children's social interactions during free play, both when the parent was present and when the parent was absent, were gathered. Parent-child relationships were observed. Children were 3- or 4-year-olds who were enrolled full-time in a 3-hour daily program. No interactions between attachment security and condition were found. However, findings indicated that children engaged in less high-level play and more low-level play during free play on days when the parent was working in the preschool. Children initiated play with peers less often in the parent's presence than in the parent's absence. Children also expressed more negative emotion and spent less time in proximity to adults when the parent was at school. The relation of the findings to attachment theory, and the implications for practitioners, are discussed. (RH)

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# THE EFFECT OF PARENT'S PRESENCE ON CHILDREN'S SOCIAL INTERACTIONS IN PRESCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

Children's social behavior was observed in the presence and absence of their parents in the parent cooperative preschool. During free play on days when their parents were working in the preschool, children engaged in less high level play and more low level play than in their parent's absence. They also initiated play with peers less often in their parent's presence than in their absence. In addition, children expressed more negative emotion and spent much less time in proximity to adults when their parents were at school than when they were not. These findings are discussed in relation to attachment theory. Implications for practitioners are also suggested.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Does parent's presence in the preschool classroom affect the frequency and complexity of the child's social interactions with peers and other adults?

- Are there significant differences in the frequency and complexity of childrens' social interactions and play in the parent present versus parent absent situations?

- If the child's behavior is significantly different in the two conditions, what specific aspects of behavior are changed? And in which condition are the child's play and social interactions less complex and less frequent?

- Do all children behave differently in their parent's presence versus absence, or are there particular subgroups of children whose social behavior is significantly affected by their parent's presence?

## SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Subjects were selected based on the child's age and enrollment status. Those children who were three or four years of age and were enrolled full-time in their preschool program were included in the study.

- 27 parent-child dyads
- 14 boys, 13 girls
  -- Mean age = 45 months (Range = 34 - 58 months)
- 85% Caucasian
- 89% of the parents observed in the classroom were mothers
- Data were collected at 2 parent cooperative preschools in the greater Los Angeles area
- Preschools were part-time morning programs lasting three hours each morning; all subjects were enrolled full-time

## THE ROLE OF THE PARENTS

By definition, parent cooperatives (also known as parent participation preschools) have a strong parental involvement component. Parents make administrative, financial, and other important decisions related to the preschool. In addition to decision-making, parents are required to directly participate in the classroom as teacher assistants on a regular basis. All participating parents have an assigned "work day", where they assist the teacher with various activities throughout the preschool session. Some parents go beyond just providing support to the teacher by preparing and leading activities, such as arts and crafts, sports, drama and story-time.

The parents in the current study participated in the classroom one day each week.

## PROCEDURES AND MEASURES

Two sets of observations were made:

(1) Social Behavior With Peers and Adults. Data were collected on children's social interactions during free play in both the parent-present and parent-absent conditions:

- Revised version of Howes' Peer Play Scale
- Howes and Stewart Adult Involvement Scale
- Child's attempts at engaging in peer interaction, responses to peer initiations, affective expressions, proximity to adults

Researchers obtained three 5-minute time samples of social behavior with peers and adults per subject on each of four days, yielding one hour total observation per child. Each five minute sample of behavior was divided into 20 second intervals.

- 30 minutes Parent Present
- 30 minutes Parent Absent

For collection of event time sampling data, children were randomly assigned to an observation sequence (PP = Parent Present, PA = Parent Absent): PP-PA-PP-PA or PA-PP-PA-PP. The only constraint on data collection was that each set of observations had to be made on different days. In other words, parent-absent data could not be collected on the parent's work day, even though the parent was out of the classroom for several minutes.

(2) Naturalistic observations of the parent-child relationship. Observations of the parent-child relationship were made on the two days that parent-present time sampling data were collected. Attachment observations consisted of written notes based on the behavioral items which comprise the Waters and Deane (1985) Q-Set. Notes were written on the back of the time sampling codesheets. All relevant behaviors were documented throughout the course of each day; therefore, behaviors and interactions of interest were displayed both during and between time sampling observations. For example, if a child cried when her parent walked away, or if she did or did not follow the parent, the researcher would document the behavior. When all parent-present data were collected, the researcher would complete the q-sort procedure at her leisure outside of the preschool setting. Each of the 60 items of the Q-Sort were placed into one of nine piles, based on how characteristic it was of a given relationship (9 = most characteristic, 1 = least characteristic).

From pile 1 to 9 the number of cards that may be placed in each pile is as follows: 3 5 7 9 12 9 7 5 3.

- 60 item version of Waters and Deane Attachment Q-Set

  -- 6 hours total (3 hours on each of 2 days)

## DISCUSSION

The current study was conducted to answer the question of whether the presence of a parent in the preschool setting significantly affects the frequency and complexity of children's social behavior. Based on detailed behavior observations during free play, several differences in behavior emerged across conditions. In sum, children engaged in less frequent and less complex peer interactions, and they expressed more negative emotion when their parents were in the classroom. Previous research with infants in a parent cooperative nursery indicates that parents' presence significantly influenced children's social behavior in similar ways (Field, 1979).

In addition, certain subgroups of children were particularly vulnerable to their parent's presence. As Figure 1 depicts, boys engaged in less complex peer play in their parent's presence than in their absence. This mean level of play for boys was less complex than the mean for girls (parent present), yet more complex than girls' play in the parent absent condition. This finding is consistent with previous research on sex differences in relation to environmental, or psychosocial stress (Zaslow and Hayes, 1986).

And as Figure 2 displays, dependency classification was sigificantly related to the child' proximity to other adults across conditions. More specifically, while all children spent less time near other adults in the parent-present condition than

in the parent-absent condition, the difference was much more profound for the children who were classified as being dependent on their parent. The dependent children spent much less time near other adults when their parents were present than independent children, but they also spent much more time near other adults when their parents were absent. This finding lends support to the notion of a "generalized adult orientation", whereby dependent children prefer their parent, but seek out other adults in the absence of their parents.

Much to our surprise, no attachment security by condition interactions were found. Based on the "secure base" concept (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall, 1978), we expected that securely attached children would explore their environment more comprehensively and competently than insecurely attached children in the parent present situation. In addition, based on previous research on attachment and social competence (Pastor, 1981; Howes, Rodning, Galluzzo & Meyers, 1988; Lieberman, 1977), we expected that securely attached children would engage in more frequent and complex positive social behavior than insecurely attached children. While no interactions were significant, one main effect supports this relationship: securely attached children cooperated more often with peer entry attempts than did insecurely attached children.

One possible explanation for why our attachment hypotheses were not confirmed is that the parent cooperative is a highly stressful environment for all children, one that affects both

securely attached and insecurely attached children. More work is necessary to explore this context-specific finding. Future research on families in parent cooperatives would benefit from assessing the parent-child relationship in the home and in the classroom, to discern whether interactions differ based on the context. This would be important to uncover, specifically related to attachment security classification.

It is important to stress that the current study was concurrent, and in no way hypothesizes about long-term impacts of participation in parent cooperatives. Furthermore, it is also important to highlight the fact that parents were treated as a uniform stimulus in that no parent attitudes, characteristics or behaviors were specifically observed and documented. Informal observations suggest that there is great variation in parent behavior in the preschool, particularly related to interaction with the target child. Future research on parent cooperatives would benefit from interviewing and observing parents, so as to paint a more complete picture of the cooperative experience.

Moreover, the current study did not randomly sample parent-child dyads from the community, nor did it randomly assign dyads to types of preschool. The families chose to participate in this type of preschool, and thus constitute a self-selected sample.

Finally, while significant differences were found in children's social behavior, the results must be interpreted with caution. Parents were only present for one session each week; thus children spent the majority of their time at school in the

parent-absent condition. Beyond these concurrent findings, it is not understood what the psychological and social ramifications of parent presence in the classroom are. However, anecdotal reports from former parent cooperative parents suggest that participation in this unique type of early childhood setting is very positive, in terms of available social support, friendship formation for both children and adults, and the fact that the parents were actively involved in their child's formal preschool education.

In closing, two main interpretations for the significant differences found based on parent presence/absence should be considered. If one subscribes to the philosophy that preschool education is designed to facilitate learning through participation in activities and through social interaction with peers and adults, one might conclude that parent participation is negative because it seems to hinder this type of behavior. In contrast, if one views the preschool period as a time for young children to work through many important socioemotional issues, parental presence in the classroom may be viewed as positive, in the sense that their presence provides a link between two important contexts for the child--school and home. This viewpoint would posit that it is healthy and normal for children to express more negative emotion in their parents' presence, because they feel psychologically safe and free to do so. In addition, peer play would be expected to be less frequent, because a significant adult is present, and is thus the object of the child's attention.

## IMPLICATIONS

These data suggest that children do behave differently while their parents are present in the preschool classroom. These findings should be incorporated into orientation meetings, parent education sessions, and parent-teacher conferences so that parents and other adults can be made aware of the impact that parents' presence has on childrens' behavior.

If parents and teachers are aware of specific aspects of a child's behavior, or can look for signs of distress, they can devise strategies for helping children cope with their parent's presence and ultimately maximize children's early educational experiences. And finally, becoming aware of the effect parents' presence has on children may prompt parents to examine their own behavior toward their child in the classroom, to discern whether their actions could be contributing to their child's behavioral changes.

Physical presence in the classroom is not equal to emotional availability and sensitivity toward the child. To ensure that parental involvement in schools is positive, parents must be attentive to their child's needs, to the demands of the larger context, and to their own needs within the environment.

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## RESULTS

Table 1. Distribution of Attachment Classification by Sex of Child.

| | ATTACHMENT CLASSIFICATION | |
|---|---|---|
| SEX OF CHILD | Secure | Insecure |
| Boys | 5 | 9 |
| Girls | 8 | 5 |

Attachment classification was determined by correlations with an ideal criterion (Waters & Deane, 1985). Median = .33. Correlations > or = .33 = secure; < .33 = insecure.

Table 2. Distribution of Dependence Classification by Sex of Child.

| | DEPENDENCE CLASSIFICATION | |
|---|---|---|
| SEX OF CHILD | Dependent | Independent |
| Boys | 8 | 6 |
| Girls | 7 | 6 |

Dependence classification was determined in the same way as for attachment. Median correlation = - .10. Correlations > or = - .10 = independent; < - .10 = dependent.

There were several interesting differences in children's social behavior in the presence and absence of their parents:

Table 3. Main Effects of Parent Presence/Absence.

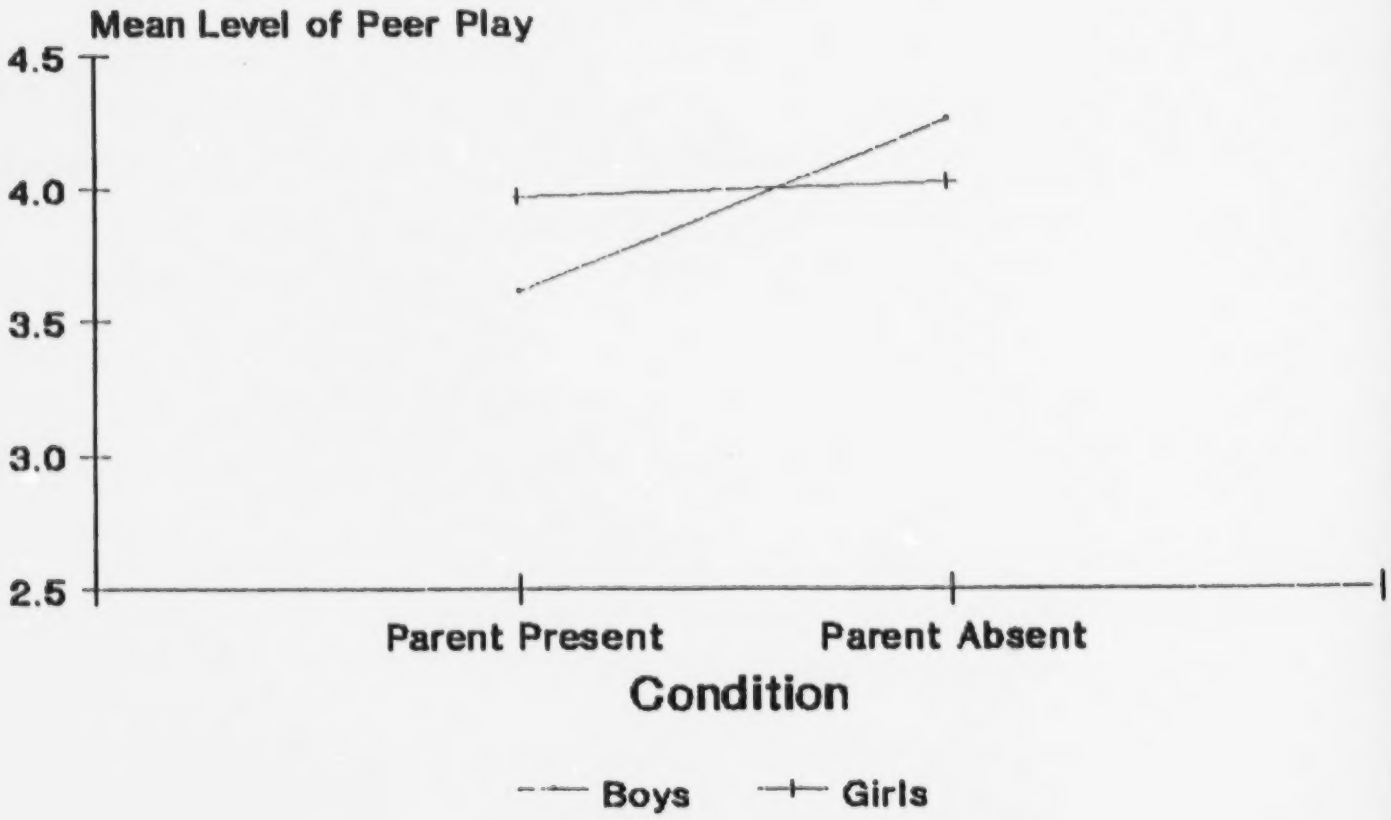
| | CONDITION | |
|---|---|---|
| CHILD BEHAVIORS | Parent Present | Parent Absent |
| Attempts at entering peer play | 7.42 | 8.77* |
| Expression of negative emotion | 5.37 | 3.15* |
| Solitary play | 23.76 | 8.29** |
| Complementary and reciprocal play | 5.07 | 8.74* |

(NOTE 1: All numbers are mean frequencies with a possible range = 0 to 180.)

(NOTE 2: Solitary play is the least complex type of play on the Howes (1980) Peer Play Scale; Complementary and reciprocal play is the most complex type of play.)

* p = .05
** p = .01

## Figure 1. Mean Level of Peer Play By Sex and Condition




(Range of Scale-1-8)

## Figure 2. Mean Frequencies of Adult Proximity By Dependency and Condition